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A COMEDY OF HISTORICAL ERRORS

BY

VARIOUS AUTHORS

With Notes and Corrections of Errors

BY

HISTORICUS.

C. S ROBINSON & CO.,
PRINCETON, N. J.



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A COMEDY OF HISTORICAL ERRORS.

MR. EDITOR.—There appeared in the PRINCETON PRESS a short time since the following statement copied from the *Princetonian*: “The sycamores in the Dean’s yard were planted in 1767 by order of the Trustees to commemorate the resistance to the Stamp Act.”

Permit one who knows the facts to state in reference to this matter, (1) that these trees were not planted in 1767; (2) that they were not planted to commemorate the resistance to the Stamp Act, or any other event; and (3) that the resistance to the Stamp Act did not take place in 1767. These trees are the survivors of a row of sycamores that were planted by order of the Trustees in 1765 in the front of the college campus. It is a mere coincidence that 1765 was also the date of the resistance to the Stamp Act.

While correcting this series of mistakes, permit him to allude to some others which have been made in the sketches of Princeton which have recently appeared in the *University Magazine*. Only two of these sketches have fallen under the writer’s notice. It is a matter of regret to see some errors in them, for which the author however was not responsible. It is hoped that all mistakes will be corrected when the articles are published in a volume.

1. The distinguished President of the college in the days of the Revolution, and signer of the Declaration of Independence, was the Rev. Dr. John Witherspoon, not Samuel Witherspoon.

2. Among the distinguished Alumni is included the Rev. Dr. Wm. H. Green, of the Theological Seminary. He was not graduated from the College of New Jersey, but at Lafayette College in 1840, and received an honorary D.D. here in 1857.

3. Again, in comparing the incident of Scott’s presence at Commencement in 1814 and his being addressed by the Valedictorian with the similar incident in the career of Washington in 1783, Scott is styled a “Major-General.” He was only a Colouel at the time, and was just recovering from the wound he had received at the battle of Lundy’s Lane. He did not become a Major-General until twenty-five or thirty years afterward. Owing to the fact that he and Gen. Gaines received their commissions on the same day, Gen. Macomb, who was their junior, was promoted over their heads in view of the natural rivalry between his seniors. Gen. Gaines was the senior of Gen. Scott by two hours, but the latter was usually considered the better officer. When Gen. Macomb died Gen. Scott was appointed to the highest position in the army, and retained it until after the outbreak of the Rebellion, when he retired on account of his advanced age. Like Washington, he was a man of splendid physique, upwards of six feet high, and none who saw him, especially in uniform, could help admiring his splendid appearance. The writer remembers as a boy seeing him as he reviewed a line of troops. He also had from Gen. Scott’s own lips the account of his visit to Princeton in 1814, the conferring

upon him of the degree of Master of Arts by the Board of Trustees of the College and of his election as an honorary member of the American Whig Society. He studied law at William and Mary College and was a practicing lawyer before he entered the army. Speaking of the honors conferred he said to the writer with a laugh, "although like Shakespeare I knew 'small Latin and less Greek,' the Virginian students in the College and Society would have it that I was a very learned man." This mention of Scott, however, has led the writer away from his simple purpose of correcting historical errors.

4. In these Princeton sketches it is stated that the National Flag that was hoisted over Nassau Hall after the firing upon Fort Sumter in 1861 was taken down by Southern students. This is another mistake. Although he may have felt unwilling to wound the feelings of the Southern students yet it was removed by order of the President of the college simply because of the injury it was doing to the cupola when the wind blew strongly, as he told the writer with some indignation in his tone when he heard that his action was unfavorably criticized. The flag was made in the room of one of the students well known to the writer, who also witnessed the raising of the second flag to which allusion is made.

5. Another mistake is the statement that the student who was "ducked," or placed under the pump, for uttering disloyal sentiments, was a Southern student. The students from the South were treated with great kindness and consideration, and no effort was made to interfere with their personal liberty or freedom of speech. It was because the student was a *Northern* man giving utterance to

offensive and disloyal opinions that he received such rough treatment at the hands of his fellow students. They were really in quest of another and much more objectional student, and failing to find him they seized upon one whose utterances were those of a thoughtless young boy, who probably meant no harm. He remained in college, and subsequently went through the halls singing, 'I'm for the Union ; I'm for the Union still.' He was regularly graduated.

It must be stated again that the author of the Princeton Sketches is not responsible for the mistakes herein corrected, and was very glad to have his attention called to them.

The writer of this communication has frequently corrected the numerous false reports and ridiculous stories in reference to Aaron Burr in connection with Princeton. He entered the Sophomore Class, as was then quite common, and was graduated in 1772 at the early age of sixteen. He could not, therefore, have been so wild and wicked as has been represented; neither was he so precocious or remarkable for scholarship as tradition states, for he was the lowest in this respect of those who received speeches at Commencement, as the programme of the Commencement of 1772 shows.

The statement that he once reproved Dr. Samuel S. Smith for arriving late at a meeting of the Cliosophic Society is simply as untrue as many others. Burr was an undergraduate member of the society for only about a year—1771-72—and Dr. Smith was never a member of that Society, but was a member and one of the founders of the American Whig Society in 1769.

The story connecting with Burr's the name of a young person who died and

was buried in Princeton is simply infamous and utterly without foundation.

So the stories by various authors about his funeral, the monument over his grave, its erection in the night, &c., are creations of the imagination. There was not the slightest mystery or secrecy about the matter. He died in New York in 1836, his remains were brought by the Camden & Amboy Railroad to Hightstown, whence they were brought to Princeton in a hearse driven by Mr. Allen, who has just died. A number of prominent gentlemen from New York and its vicinity accompanied the body. The procession was met outside of the town by the Princeton Blues, and the funeral ceremonies took place in the College Chapel, Dr. Carnahan preaching the funeral sermon, the students generally attending the funeral, and the Cliosophic Society appropriately honoring his memory, as he was one of its earliest and most distinguished members. A slab was obtained for his grave, but as the person who had ordered it had not fully paid for it it was not erected. The present monument was erected nearly twenty years subsequently by a relative out of the proceeds of a small piece of property belonging to Col. Burr. The gentleman in whose marble yard it was made, and whose workmen erected it, was known to the writer and conversed with him about it. The mutilations of it and of the slabs over the graves of the early Presidents of the college are acts of Vandalism deserving the severest condemnation.

It may not be uninteresting to add that in the last years of his life Col. Burr was

accustomed to spend a part of each year in Princeton. His law office is still standing in Reed Street, New York, just in the rear of the Stewart Building. It is a plain brick building two stories in height with an old fashioned inclined cellar door encroaching upon the pavement. For years it was occupied by the janitor or porter of the Stewart building and although the ground is so valuable in this neighborhood the building has not been removed and was even unoccupied when the writer last saw it. From this office Col. Burr used to come to the Nassau Hotel here whose proprietor used to keep for him a particular kind of wine and consulted his tastes in other respects. He used to run races in the yard of the hotel with one of the young sons of the proprietor and was much elated at his victories, not being aware that the boy had been carefully instructed not to outrun him.

It has recently been announced in the College Bulletin and elsewhere that the One Hundred and Fiftieth Anniversary of the College is to be celebrated in 1896. This would be a most serious mistake. The first Commencement was held in Newark, Nov. 9, 1748; the Centennial in which Historicus participated was celebrated June 30, 1847. Therefore the hundred and fiftieth anniversary should take place not in 1896 but in June, 1897.

The undersigned will rejoice if by this communication he can prevent errors from gaining currency as the facts of history. Truth is his only object.

HISTORICUS.

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